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Cuban Government Releases Three of Four Prominent Dissidents

by LADB Staff

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Cuban authorities freed three members of the Group of Four arrested last year for criticizing the Community Party and various state policies. The releases came during what some dissidents say is the worst crackdown on political expression in years.

The government began freeing the prisoners May 12 with the release of Felix Bonne Carcasses during the third year of his four-year sentence. Bonne, an engineer, was one of four prominent dissidents arrested in 1997 and sentenced to terms ranging from three-and-a-half to five years on sedition and other charges (see NotiCen, 1999-03-18).

The other members of the group are economist Marta Beatriz Roque, attorney Rene Gomez Manzano, and Vladimiro Roca, a former military pilot and member of the Cuban Communist Party politburo. The arrests came after the four dissidents published a critique of the Cuban Communist Party in 1997 and compounded the offense by going to the foreign media with their criticisms of the regime.

The charges included attempts to inhibit foreign investment, encouraging Cubans not to vote, and working through Cuban exiles in the US to encourage civil disobedience in Cuba. In February 1999, a new law (Ley de la Proteccion de la Independencia y la Economia de Cuba) established more severe penalties for acts construed as collaborating with the US. The law targeted dissidents and journalists accused of "manufacturing" internal dissent and was justified as a necessary counter to alleged US attempts to promote dissent in line with US policies (see NotiCen, 1999-03-11).

The new law prompted an international condemnation of Cuba led by the US and the European Union (EU). The controversy touched on a fundamental point of disagreement between Cuba and its detractors on the issue of dissent. The US argues that Cuban dissenters are systematically suppressed, imprisoned, and deprived of civil rights. The Cuban government argues that little serious dissent exists in Cuba and that those arrested are counterrevolutionaries acting with money and encouragement from the US.

The Foreign Relations Ministry denied the release of the three was intended to please the European Union (EU) or had any other political motive. Aymee Hernandez Quesada, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Relations, said the release was a routine matter of time off for good behavior as provided by law. "That is strictly the reason and no other in these cases," said Hernandez. While estimates of the number of political prisoners varies from a few hundred to more than a thousand, prominent human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez said that after the three were freed some 350 remained.

Cuba accuses Poland, Czech Republic of meddling

Cuba has linked some dissidents to foreign governments other than the US. Earlier this year, Cuba began attacking the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic for sponsoring the UN human rights resolution condemning Cuba. The four prisoners figured prominently in the accusations against Cuba (see CubaSource, 2000-05-10).

The official Communist party newspaper Granma ran a story accusing Polish Sen. Zbigniew Romaszewski of conspiring with dissidents against the revolution. Hector Palacios, head of the Solidarity Democratic Party, was named in the article as one of the Cuban dissidents the senator met with. Palacios said, "There is no new flexibility by the Cuban government." He said that he and 20 other dissidents were placed under house arrest to prevent them from holding a meeting. That was during the same week the three prisoners were being released.

Dissidents note crackdown since last November

Earlier this year, dissidents reported an increase in government actions against them. The start of the crackdown coincided with increased dissident activity before the November 1999 Ibero-American Summit held in Havana. In March, the nongovernmental Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional reported that the crackdown was the worst in a decade.

From November 1999 through February 2000, more than 300 dissidents were arrested, most for a few hours or days, though 21 were still in jail when the report was released March 3. Another 240 were sentenced to house arrest for short periods to prevent them from attending dissident demonstrations or meetings. "There is a visible increase in discontent, there are more demonstrations of discontent and dissident activity," Sanchez, head of the commission, told The Miami Herald. "Therefore, there is more repression."

Among those arrested was Oscar Elias Biscet, a medical doctor who led a 40-day hunger strike last year to protest the treatment of dissidents. He is president of the human rights organization Fundacion Lawton. He and several others were arrested in September 1999 as he prepared to teach a class on civil disobedience. A dissident who was briefly detained at the same time said he saw Biscet beaten by police. Biscet was arrested several other times in 1999 and finally given a three-year prison sentence.

One explanation of the crackdown is that it was a protest against the US government's handling of the Elian Gonzalez affair and the expulsion of Cuban diplomat Jose Imperatori for allegedly running a spy ring in the US (see NotiCen, 2000-03-02). Bill introduced to aid dissidents Dissident leaders in Cuba have denied they receive aid from the US. But a House bill proposes to do just that. Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart introduced a bill on May 24 to give financial aid to Cuban dissenters for "democratic assistance."

Sponsors of the bill said they hoped it would result in a movement similar to the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s, which was assisted with US funds. If passed, the bill could also place dissidents in danger of lengthy prison sentences under the February 1999 law. The main purpose of the law was to respond to what Cuban authorities interpreted as an increase of US

pressure through such reforms as increasing the amount of money Cubans in the US could send to relatives in Cuba funds that could go to encourage dissent (see NotiCen, 1999-01-07).

A congressional source told the Miami newspaper El Nuevo Herald, "This bill adds a new ingredient to the congressional and national discussion about lifting the embargo and authorizing the sale of food and medicine to Cuba, because it brings the internal opposition into the discussion."

The bill would provide financial aid to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Cuba to be used for communications equipment, printers, and copy and fax machines. Aid would also go to families of political prisoners. The bill requires annual certification that the NGOs are not controlled by the Cuban government. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 02/26/00; Notimex, 02/10/00, 05/05/00; Associated Press, 08/16/99, 05/04/00, 05/06/00, 05/12/00, 05/15/00, 05/16/00; Reuters, 02/24/00, 03/03/00, 05/16/00; Agence France-Presse, 05/23/00; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), Foreign Relations Ministry press conference, 05/25/00; The Miami Herald, 09/16/99, 02/17/00, 05/04/00, 05/17/00, 05/25/00]

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